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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000457

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR URGES EU/LATAM SUPPORT FOR SUMATE

REF: A. CARACAS 339

[1](#)B. CARACAS 340

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador convened a meeting of European and Latin American diplomats February 10 to discuss diplomatic steps to support the four Sumate directors charged with conspiracy, after it appeared some of the defendants might be detained pending the outcome of the trial. Ambassador reviewed USG actions to energize support for the NGO among other entities, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the OAS, international press, and the Catholic Church, as well as keeping the U.S. Congress informed. As the meeting came the day after an appeals court action postponed the trial for what could be a few months (septel), the diplomats were less enthusiastic in their responses, preferring to engage informal contacts with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) rather than make public statements. Positive responses came from the British Ambassador and Spanish DCM and the most negative from the Italian and French -- the Brazilians, Chileans, and Austrians (EU presidency) were no-shows. While the crisis passed us over this time, this episode nonetheless proves there is interest that needs to be maintained and encouraged over the coming months. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador Brownfield convened the meeting at his residence on February 10. The British and Italian ambassador attended, along with lower representation from Mexico (Charge'), Peru, France, Germany, Finland (Charge'), Norway (Charge'), Nicaragua (Charge'), Spain, and Canada. The Brazilians, Chileans, and Austrians (current EU president) were invited but did not attend. DCM and A/Polcouns also participated.

13. (C) The Ambassador began by recognizing that the decision by the appeals court, which occurred after the invitations to the meeting went out, effectively postponed the Sumate trial for a few months. The Ambassador suggested the recent rounds of expulsions between the USG and BRV may have opened a window for President Hugo Chavez to attack Sumate by proxy. DCM noted, too, that Chavez' pronouncement that the United States is his enemy in the upcoming election makes the Sumate/NED case a perfect target. The Ambassador further suggested that flagging international support for Sumate may have tempted Chavez to take bolder action against the NGO. The Ambassador said the BRV and Sumate are in a "game of chicken," with the BRV persecuting the NGO to stay out of electoral politics and the NGO leaders refusing to be intimidated into silence or exile. The Ambassador listed several entities that the USG had encouraged to show support: the NED, international human rights groups, the OAS, the Vatican, international press, and other governments.

Diplomats Emphasize Quiet Diplomacy

14. (C) In general, the diplomats were supportive of Sumate and recognized the unfair treatment it was receiving from Venezuelan courts. The diplomats were worried, however, that public statements might be perceived by a hot-headed Chavez as a challenge and thereby exacerbate the situation. The

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Canadian DCM noted that his ambassador had already raised concerns with Vice Foreign Minister Mari Pili Hernandez, who responded that the executive branch had no influence over judicial matters. The British Ambassador recalled that the EU had in fact pressured the government 18 months ago when the trial proceedings started, which drew a diplomatic protest from then-Vice Foreign Minister for Europe Delcy Rodriguez. The Spanish DCM noted that the latest court decision had essentially started everything over from scratch but that the case should be closely watched. The Mexican Charge suggested that it would be good to wait and see how the new case developed.

15. (C) Notable exceptions to the mainstream opinion came from the French representative and Italian ambassador. The French emboff warned against putting Sumate publicly at the center of what he characterized as a bilateral dispute between the United States and the BRV. He agreed, however, with discreet bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to support Sumate. He also criticized Sumate for short-sided electoral advice to the opposition that had left it weaker with each electoral cycle. The Italian ambassador was most vocal -- and long-winded -- in his defense of the autonomy of the Venezuelan courts. He rejected any public pressure tactics against Chavez who, he said, was a softy ("un ternito") when confronted alone and in person. The Italian recommended a gentle attempt at dialogue directly with the president. (Comment: The Italian ambassador is a Chavez apologist who carries little weight among his colleagues.) Ambassador Brownfield argued that regardless of the new delays, the Sumate case would continue to be politically-influenced and lacking judicially transparency. He urged the diplomats not to wait until the next crisis to formulate a response -- or it might be too late. The Ambassador promised to send an Emboff to all future Sumate trial sessions and offered to coordinate with short-staffed embassies to send observers at the last minute should substantive proceedings take place.

Comment

¶6. (C) When things were looking grim for the Sumate directors, the EU and Latins were genuinely worried and some either did or were at least prepared to act through back channels. The pre-empted crisis, therefore, was probably a good test of other countries' resolve. We need to remain vigilant, of course, and keep pressing other governments to send observers to the trial and keep visibility on the Sumate case.

BROWNFIELD